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COMANCHE BONDAGE

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Dr. John Charles Beales's settlement of
La Villa de Dolores on Las Moras Creek
in Southern Texas of the 1830's

with an annotated reprint of

Sarah Ann Horn's Narrative

of her captivity among the Comanches
her ransom by traders in New Mexico
and return via the Santa Fē Trail

by

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A Brief Account of the Manners and Customs of the Camanche Indians

[101] The Camanches are a wandering nation of Indians of whom there appears to be but little generally known. They consist of, as near as I could learn, two tribes, that speak the same language, and who, with several other tribes, with whom I did not become acquainted, inhabit the [131] extensive territory stretching from the northern boundary of Texas to the Rocky Mountains, and in the extent of which Nature seems generally to have adapted her supplies to the comparatively few wants of the children of the forest, who exist upon [134] her bounty. Indeed, one would suppose, that a tenth part of the toil they endure, in the long and [131] fatiguing marches they are almost continually making, rationally applied, with the facilities of the country they inhabit, would afford them four times the amount of the good things of this life that they now enjoy; but with such kind of estimates, they seem to have no concern. They are a hardy race, and endure the toil and privations, which their unsettled and wandering life exposes

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them to, with a kind of stoic indifference. But they are not slow to profit by the labor of others beside themselves, whenever an opportunity offers; and it is truly astonishing to witness the pains and labor they will go through to obtain one; and when they have marked their victim, it would seem that nothing short of an interposing miracle of mercy could save him. They literally live by slaying and murdering all of man and beast that come in their way. There are [55] exceptions in the case of the traders who go among them, and who have learned to anticipate their wants, and to supply them; but woe to the unwary trader that offends them! He seldom, if ever, fails to pay the forfeit with his life. They are trained, from infancy to age, to deeds of cruelty and bloodshed, and are as wholly wreckless of human rights, out of their own circle, as though they held in their own hands the destinies of the universe; and they appear to be alike insensible of obligation to any being in heaven or on earth. I could not, from all the observation of which I was capable, discover that they had any idea of a Supreme Being; nor could I learn that they paid their devotion to any kind of being, unless something of the kind might be obscurely inferred from the following circumstance: In a storm, with thunder and lightning, I have frequently seen them go out and throw dirt into the air, and utter unintelligible sounds; but whether it was designed to express their resentment to, or

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conciliate the favor of, the Author of the war of elements, I could not determine. Another circumstance induced me to think they might have some notions of a future state. There was a young woman among them, who certainly possessed some traits of character more amiable by far than the most of her race with whom I was acquainted; she sickened and died, when their grief, as usual, was unbounded. I observed to one of the females, that I hoped she was better off than when here; – she smiled, and pointed upwards. The strength of their attachment to each other, and the demonstration they give of the same, even to the dividing of the last morsel with each other upon the point of starvation, might put many professed christians to the blush! But they are just the reverse of all this to all the world beside. They think themselves the cleverest race of men on earth, and treat all others as infinitely inferior to themselves. They have no formal marriages among them. They generally take wives at an early age. Each man is allowed to take five women; but, in making his selection, the ties of consanguinity oppose no barrier; hence they are truly a consanguineous race of so motley a mixture, that it would be impossible to identify the connexions. The distinction, however, [50] might be less obscure, but for the fact, that with them matrimonial alliances oppose no restraint to promiscuous intercourse. The relation of the women to the men differs little from a state of the

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most abject slavery. It is impossible to conceive of a more absolute despotism, than that under which the wife is held by her husband in these savage wilds. When they hunt the buffalo, she must carry his gun, and whatever else is to be carried; when he shoots the buffalo, it would be infinitely beneath his dignity to put his hand to it afterwards; she has it to skin, to cut up the meat, and, whatever be the distance, or the difficulties in the way, the poor creature must carry the hide, meat, and all, to the camp, and if it cannot be done at once, she must go and return until it is done. At the camp, she has to do all; to provide the fuel, to fetch the water, to dress the buffalo skins, to dig the grave, and bury the dead. Her lordly master will seldom so much as turn himself, to get a drink of water, or to get his moccasins, or indeed anything he might please to want. In all the above, he speaks, and is instantly obeyed. Never, until I was shut up in the horrible shades of pagan darkness, where the long night of Nature holds her iron reign, did I see and feel the indebtedness particularly of my sex to the precepts of the gospel of Christ! (Would not the publication of it to these poor heathen do them some good? Would not its peaceful and equalizing precepts, help to raise these poor oppressed females, could they be brought to bear upon their cruel husbands?)

In their apparel, they differ little (as I should suppose) from other tribes, unless it be in the

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mournful fact, that much of it is obtained from those unfortunate individuals, who fall victims to their cupidity. They cut off the hair from the back part of their heads, leaving it in front, the longer the better, and which they divide so as to bring it down from each temple, and to this they fasten any other that they can get, until it nearly reaches the feet. The savage who cut off mine, wore it in this way, and took frequent opportunity exultingly to remind me of it. But their cues with them are indispensable, and if they cannot obtain them in one way, they will in another, and horse-hair answers in the room of better. They do [57] them up usually in strips of red and blue cloth, carefully winding it closely from the top to the extremity, with the red on one side, and the blue on the other. To a small tuft of hair which they leave behind, is appended trinkets of the most trifling kind, such as old buttons, or any thing that will jingle, and on their arms and fingers they have a profusion of rings of different kinds. Their ornaments are laid aside when they go out to war.

Their treatment of the sick is truly singular. When any of them, whether male or female, is considered to be seriously indisposed, they (the women) take all the grass and every other obstruction from a spot of ground sufficiently large to admit of the construction of two tents together; these are for the accommodation of friends. In the centre of the circle formed by the tent, they dig

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a hole for the fire, the smoke from which passes through an opening in the top; on the margin of the hole for the fire, they dig a trench in a circular form, and fill it with water. In a direct line from the door across the centre of the fire-place, and between it and the fire, they spread a buffalo skin for the sick person's bed. At the head and feet, and on each side opposite the shoulder, they place small heaps of dirt moulded in the form of a sugar loaf; they then place a larger heap, of nearly the same form, exactly between the one at the head and the side of the tent, and another between the fire and the one at the feet; in these two last they plant willow trees. They then cut a trench, with square sides, and about three feet deep, in a direct line from the door of the tent, and from ten to fifteen feet in length. The dirt taken from this trench is taken to the end opposite or farthest from the door, and thrown into a sort of mound, and a willow tree set in it, and smaller ones of the same kind are placed on each side of the trench, quite up to the door. The friends are then formally invited, when a scene commences which defies an adequate description. The musicians come forward, with fife and drum, and play with all their might; the whole company passes in single file through the trench into the tent, and the music, and dancing continues through the night, with short intervals of rest. When thirsty, they drink of the wa- [58] ter in the trench about the fire, and frequently approach

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the patient and spirt the water from their mouths in his face, and affectionately enquire if he is better. Should the poor creature answer in the affirmative, (which is not often the case, as might well be supposed,) they attest their joy in the most ludicrous manner; but if the patient dies at this, or at a subsequent period of his illness, he is interred in the grave already dug at his door. The treatment is the same in the case of either sex, and they do not administer any kind of medicine. When a man is buried, they put his gun, powder and ball, bow and arrows, into the grave with him; and when a woman dies, they bury her as above stated, and then burn her tent and all she had; after which, they join together and build the family a new one. When a young child dies, they bury it lashed to the board on which they carry it.

But no pen can describe the extent of their wailings for the dead. When they return after a long absence, they alight from their beasts, and their women immediately turn them out, and then come and sit down at a respectful distance. Not a word of any kind is spoken by any one; the whole company is seated with the utmost silence. At length, without uttering a word, they begin to cry, and continue in this kind of exercise until it rises to a high pitch; when one of them suddenly stops, rises from his seat, and addresses the company, who at once give him their attention, while he tells them, in substance, that they have met together once more

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in safety; that there is no cause for crying, and exhorts them to refrain; when, by mutual consent, they cease crying as easily as they commenced it, and go about their business. But if any of their friends have died in the fight, or otherwise, their grief appears deep and lasting. In this case, they immediately commence cutting and disfiguring themselves in a shocking manner, and with varied and unseemly gestures, accompanied with loud and tremendous yells, they seem to try to excel each other. They will ascend the loftiest peaks of the tallest mountains they can reach, and through the whole of the gloomiest night, send abroad through the surrounding forest their dismal wailings, in howls of horrid [59] accent. Nor are their signs of grief much less pungent when they lose their friends at home; but they hold all others enemies, and treat them accordingly, dead or alive. The reader has seen plenty of this in the preceding narrative; but I will here add, they fastened the scalps of our murdered friends to the bridles of their mules, so as to suspend them under the chin of the animals, and this was their constant practice while I was with them. When they encamped, they would fix them upon the top of long poles, and set them up by their tents, as I have seen flags upon garrisons, and elsewhere.

When a woman was to be confined, they removed the grass and everything else from the surface of the ground, and in a convenient place in the tent

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844 for her to lie down upon. They would be so particular as to sift the earth through the fingers, and detect and take out everything but the soft pulverized earth. Upon this spot she would pass her hour, when she would rise, take up her child, throw a blanket about her, and go to the nearest stream, bathe herself and child, and return to her business the same day, as though nothing had happened! – and it was the same thing whether she was at home, or pursuing a journey. Some of my readers may think the above too great a tax upon their credulity; but I can assure them, upon the veracity of one who has been a witness in several instances, that such is the fact.

841 In the case of catamenia, the woman instantly leaves her tent, and, as far as possible, seeks a place of concealment from her husband and family; she declines all company, especially of men, nor will she speak to one if she can avoid it. Should there be any article of her neighbor's within her tent at the time of her leaving it, it is thrown out upon the ground, and there it remains until they leave that place for some other, when the owner picks it up; but on no occasion will her family bring anything from abroad into her tent while she is absent. If the family with whom she stays are under the necessity of borrowing any article while she is with them, it is washed with the utmost care, when it is brought in, and when it is to be sent home. She remains in her [*60*] retreat four days, during

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which time she takes no food, except a little broth and some kind of vegetables; but on no account will she taste of meat of any kind until her four days are expired; after that, she bathes herself and returns to her husband.

As to cleanliness in their persons, I think them the most particular people I ever saw. They bathe at all seasons of the year. I have frequently seen them, both men and women, break the ice for this purpose; and they are punctilious not to eat without washing. I never knew one of them to rise and go abroad without washing. They are very particular in the above respect with regard to their children; they are also far from being as indifferent to the kind and preparation of their food, as one might suppose. The men eat horse-flesh when they can get nothing else; but their women, as a general thing, will not taste of it, nor will they permit it to come near their dwellings. They subsist mostly upon buffalo meat, with some other game, which they cook, in a cleanly manner, with various kinds of vegetables, some of which possess somewhat of the quality, and they have the faculty of preparing it as a good substitute for bread.

In conclusion, perhaps I ought to say, that with reference to a point, of all others of the most sacred importance to a captive female, (with gratitude to my Maker I record it.) my fears were in no part realized.

Query. – Is it not strange, indeed, that a nation

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so grossly sunk in the darkness of heathenism, as is the one of which the account is here closed, should be so exact in the observation of customs so strikingly analogous to the letter of the Mosaic ritual? Are these strange people some of the posterity of fathers who once worshipped at the Jewish altar? and when shall the light of the Gospel illuminate the pathway of their return? Saviour of the human race, hasten the blessed day!

HERMITAGE, GREENE COUNTY, ILL.
JUNE, 1839

NOTICE [40]

Since the notice of the forthcoming of the above publication appeared in the city papers, it has been suggested by some, that it may have been gotten up from sinister motives, and that it is not founded on facts, and with reference to which, the writer would say, that Mrs. Horn was brought from Santa Fé under the immediate care of Messrs. Workman and Rowland, who, it is presumed, are well known to respectable merchants in this city, and elsewhere, as Santa Fé traders. Mrs. Horn was placed by Mr. Workman in the family of his brother, in New Franklin when she first came to the States, as her book says, and she still remains there. Many other names might be given, but those referred to are above suspicion.

[40] This "notice" appeared on the upper half of the rear wrapper of the original edition.